

Up In A Tree

I climbed into a cherry tree today and began the ritual, one of my favorites, of pruning it.

The tree is a little beauty, too tall to be a true fruit tree, too squat and branchy for lumber. It is merely pleasing to the eye. It stands apart from the oaks and has light and space enough to thrive. Given a little care I think we will be friends for a long time.

I am new here on this land. The tree and I are just becoming acquainted. As of today it knows what I want and in the spring it will show me what it can give. There is nothing quite like a cherry in bloom. Cities become known for them as in Washington, D.C. Countries take them as a national treasure as in Japan. It is no wonder. I can close my eyes and see it as it will appear three months hence. The blizzard of blossoms on a gusty May day will be enough to take your breath away.

For now it stands a foot deep in snow, limbs bare and twisted about. It's been a long time since my new friend has had any attention, maybe never. But it will star in our spring pageant; I have no doubt of it. You can tell good stock when you see it. As I cut away the crossing, competing branches, the undershade twigs that have no future, this tree revealed a structure and shape of postcard purity. It will take center stage in our landscape.

Michelangelo was fond of saying that to make a sculpture you start with a block of stone and just cut away what's not part of the finished piece. He meant that there's a form inside the stone already. The trick is knowing what it is and taking away the unnecessary bits. To sculpt the human form, he said just carve away until you reach the skin! Cheeky fellow. Pruning is like that. Even in the most neglected tree, there's a form under there. There's a structure that is graceful and shapely. It has a certain movement to it, up and out or leaning to the right, stretching for the sky or spreading shoulder high. It's in there. The trick is taking away the parts that don't belong.

There's a risk to pruning of course and this excitement adds to the pleasure of the task. You can't put back what you've lopped off so it is wise to think ahead and visualize. It's a good idea to decide where you want to end up and keep that goal in mind. I find that shaping a tree uses all of one's focus, that you have to pay attention all the time while you're working. I find this focus on bringing out the tree unseen to be extremely rewarding. It is meditative. It is pure. I also like to think that the tree appreciates it, in an arboreal sort of way. Maybe it's akin to getting a really good haircut. You feel great 'cause you look great.

My father was a gardener. He dealt in the rarified air of the traditional Japanese Garden. In his gardens everything and I mean everything was planned and placed and pruned just so. Everything from his prized weeping maples to smoothed over river stones, everything had its spot. His best work was Mozartian in its structure. Displace one phrase and the whole thing starts to collapse. Move one of my father's beautifully cast concrete lanterns and it sticks out like that proverbial sore thumb. But in his placement the blend was seamless. Your eye was invited to move down the pebble sand path past the boxwood and euonymus across the pond to a resting place made of boulders and a simple bench. Lovely. In what other part of the world is moss elevated to art?

This idea of "nature perfected" is a very old human conceit. The urge to organize and sculpt and rephrase the natural palette goes back millennia. In one sense it is merely self serving and vain, the idea that one can improve on nature. But in its purest forms it is an attempt to take the raw material, the notes and rests of a composition, and mold them in such a way as to take the viewer, the visitor in the garden, to a place of serenity and joy. No kidding, it really is.

All of which is to say that I like pruning, I like it a lot. And in the spring when you come to visit I hope to show you a spot or two on this lovely land that have benefitted from my work. In the meantime don't bother to knock but look outside instead. That will be me up in a tree.